



The Wellness Syndrome

Carl Cederstrom

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"Not exercising as much as you should? Counting your calories in your sleep? Feeling ashamed for not being happier? You may be a victim of the wellness syndrome."

In this ground-breaking new book, Carl Cederstrom and Andrew Spicer argue that the ever-present pressure to maximize our wellness has started to work against us, making us feel worse and provoking us to withdraw into ourselves. The Wellness Syndrome follows health freaks who go to extremes to find the perfect diet, corporate athletes who start the day with a dance party, and the self-trackers who monitor everything, including their own toilet habits. This is a world where feeling good has become indistinguishable from being good. Visions of social change have been reduced to dreams of individual transformation, political debate has been replaced by insipid moralising, and scientific evidence has been traded for new-age delusions. A lively and humorous diagnosis of the cult of wellness, this book is an indispensable guide for everyone suspicious of our relentless quest to be happier and healthier.

The Wellness Syndrome Details

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Author : Carl Cederstrom

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John Newton says

This book is a much-needed exposé of the combination of New Age speculation and trashy pop psychology that is current today in much popular writing and some management and health literature. The authors subject the "wellness" craze to scrupulous thought and reveal (as anyone with a shred of reason should already have suspected) that the emperor has no clothes.

Meg says

I agree wholeheartedly with everything the authors had to say about the pernicious influences of the wellness and self-help industries, but upon completion immediately began reading a self-help book. Sigh.

Lada says

I knew I was in trouble when the authors quoted Žižek five pages in. But that was what made the book so interesting too: that it referenced a lot of other writing. The arguments presented were... argumentative, and as such I doubt that they are palatable in their entirety to anyone, but they are great for spurring reflection on organizational and individual (self)involvement in our wellness/fitness.

Karen says

I loved the concept of this book, a critique of the societal command to "be well" (or at least *try* to be well) that people in the West live under now. Cederstrom's argument is that the wellness command actually imposes guilt and stress on us, makes us narcissistic and takes our attention away from problems that may be more important to solve. In the course of the book he also points out that the motivation behind encouraging people to be well or pursue wellness is not a concern with the actual well being of the people being "encouraged" (or coerced, as the case may be), but the realization that healthy people are more productive, less expensive employees.

All of this resonates with me and I started reading with glee. I was disappointed by sloppiness in places, though. Although the book has a notes section, some assertions that should have had sources cited did not. Unfortunately this made a couple of the middle chapters seem more like polemic than argument.

Overall, though, the critique is good. The last two chapters on electronically assisted control and on people who try to wriggle loose from the wellness command are especially good. I'm glad this book was written!

Dirk Nachbar says

good summary of current neoliberalism critique

Dave says

This book explains why the self-help, fit, happiness craze is a problem. We are creating a narcissistic autistic hedonistic society. We've made fitness, happiness, and success an ideology. Those who are not are flawed. That's exemplified first with smoking - it's not that smoking is bad but smokers are bad. So are fat people, unemployed people and poor people - that is a major problem with the biomorality of the self help craze.

Self help craze started in the 20s and 30s with Norman Vincent Peal, Dale Carnegie, and Napoleon Hill. it continues on with wellness, mindfulness, and the Secret.

The books debunks the fake science behind all these gurus.

I read a lot of these books.

They are empty and fake.

No I know that it wasn't me, it was them.

I feel happy or I should say content.

Pauline says

Je suis contente d'avoir lu ce livre, que j'avais sur ma wishlist depuis sa sortie il y a presque deux ans. Cela dit je n'ai pas l'impression d'avoir appris grand chose, dans le sens où je suis grossièrement d'accord avec les auteurs, pour dire qu'on vit dans une société de tyrannie du bonheur au profit du capitalisme. Je les ai trouvés un peu trop dans le jugement, d'ailleurs, face aux personnes qui rentrent dans le moule, se forcent à répondre à ces attentes, sans qu'ils donnent beaucoup de solutions -- ce n'est pas vraiment leur travail mais du coup le jugement + la relative absence d'alternative, c'est un peu too much. D'autant plus que les seules alternatives qu'ils proposent réellement sont édifiantes. Le mouvement d'acceptation des gros, ça, évidemment que je suis pour (même si eux y trouvent encore quelque chose à redire, parce que la manière dont c'est fait serait trop proche du système de tyrannie du bien-être, et je ne suis pas sûre que les gros qui sont dans ce mouvement aient cette "haine profonde de soi" dont parlent les auteurs...), mais le barebacking ça, j'avoue que je n'ai pas réussi à comprendre d'où ça sortait.

Enfin bref, ça se lit vite, ce n'est pas compliqué à lire, mais je pense que ça apporterait plus de connaissances et de matière à réflexion à quelqu'un qui ne se serait pas déjà pas mal renseigné sur ce sujet.

Funda Guzer says

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Allys Dierker says

I've found it easy to adopt the rhetoric of "wellness" as a personal responsibility: make good choices, eat well, exercise, chase after the perfect night's sleep, manage stress because I can't manage how others treat me. I've participated in those wellness initiatives at work (for straightforward and for ulterior motives, for physical and financial and psychological reasons). I've tracked my performance on at least 4 versions of a heart-rate monitor. I keep a training log. I've periodically kept an Excel food journal of my own design that tracks weight, calories, macronutrients, fiber, calcium, blah blah blah. I'm trying to be more disciplined about a mindfulness practice to reduce stress. I often roll my eyes at smokers and vapers and people who buy into every fitness fad as a quick fix because, duh, they're just making bad choices that anyone through sheer willpower can simply choose NOT to make. I guess I might characterize myself as having bought into the idea that "wellness" is unassailably valuable.

Until this book.

Cederstrom and Spicer invoke biomorality as the moral demand to be happy and healthy, and cite this as the underlying principle of the wellness syndrome: a passive nihilism that generates focus on the self instead of focus on the world.

They use a broad umbrella to cover several trends, including coaching (think life-coaching and executive coaching), mindfulness, smoking, happiness/positive psychology, the self-quantifier trend, and gamification. Both are business school professors, so it makes sense for them to tap into concepts that are not only pop-psych but are also trending in workplaces. In each of these trends, they see a movement to shift responsibility inward to the individual and away from broader social responsibility.

Not all of the connections back to "wellness" are particularly tight, but I found the value of *Wellness* in the analyses of each individual trend as creating burdens for the individual while indemnifying larger power

structures. Their analysis of interventionist "reality" cooking shows (Jamie Oliver's series) could easily apply to most reality shows--the formula and script are designed to appeal to a middle-class viewership who can feel better about themselves ("I don't eat crap like that: look at how superior I am") while also taking voyeuristic glee in how awful the chavs eat. Incidentally, Spicer is British and Cederstrom is Swedish, so "chav" was a new term for me. Think British "welfare queen" or "trailer trash." Cederstrom and Spicer also note that conceptualizing the chavs and chavettes and welfare queens as a particular kind of person serves an important differentiating purpose: it establishes the lower class in opposition to the middle class on the basis of "wellness" and "healthy choices" and has the benefit of "giv[ing the viewer] a smug righteousness, making you think you're on the right side of the moral law" (60). The formula holds true for just about every "reality" show on TLC (about hoarders, about the morbidly obese, fill-in-the-blank challenge of want in a land of plenty): discover a problem; attempt to intervene; face resistance; encounter a crisis; try again with a renewed mix of tough love and overwrought sentimentality; SUCCESS! "Wellness" has helped me put my finger on why I was so entertained by those shows initially and then felt increasingly uncomfortable with each new episode I sat through. It just feels mean to hold someone so responsible for a variety of circumstances, only a few of which are ultimately in the person's control.

Their section on happiness is also instructive--my personal reading has started with tomes about happiness and how to increase happiness (and how futile that undertaking can be), and has moved into self-help and management positivity (both of which I love to hate, but I suspect will get old soon). They trace happiness through Norman Vincent Peale (the power of positive thinking) to Martin Seligman (positive psychology) and parse the problems with investigations of happiness. Much is backed by "bad science," relies on unclear definitions, and often tips over into ideology repackaged as academic studies and employed to support exploitation and hierarchies as a "common good." When happiness is defined as something within your control--how you interpret, how you behave, in short, how you CHOOSE--it eliminates consideration of material conditions that are outside of your control.

The self-quantifier and gamification trends also loom large in a culture of wearables and notifications and wellness initiatives in workplaces that take the form of reported data and "incentives" for "good" behavior (full disclosure: I've participated in those in my workplace. First, to get out from behind my desk and second, because as in many workplaces, the games are tied to financial incentives/disincentives). In an age of self-quantification that compels people to measure their steps, heart rates, sleep, productivity, and efficiency, what often gets lost is what we will do with all that time freed up by increased efficiency. What's more, such a focus on improvement through technology, paves the way for the ultimate technological consequence: those who can't upgrade themselves are rendered obsolete.

The gamification trend leads to more social control and ultimately pits resistance to authority against the conformity of measuring and sharing everything: all those games feed data to (I'm going to say it) a version of Big Brother, and creates the illusion of individual expression.

Ultimately, *Wellness* teases out the unanswerable question of where individual responsibility ends and where social responsibility starts. Shifting all aspects of wellness and happiness to the individual forces more people into a narcissistic orientation that emphasizes personal behavioral interventions and that positions "inequality, discrimination and authoritarianism [as] too grade to tackle head-on" (134). The conclusion: "To escape the clutches of wellness, we might recognize that, as humans, we are defined not exclusively by our potentials, but also by our impotence. And this is nothing to be ashamed of. Accepting our impotence allows us to see that we will always come up short in one way or another" (134).

Cederstrom and Spicer have presented a more nuanced interpretation of the harm that it might do to accept, unquestioningly, the notion that "wellness" is a given, an apolitical concept that is without an alternative

viewpoint.

Kaarna says

3,5 stars, mainly for content. It was not badly written but the main point for me was the idea of the wellness syndrome and its effects on society.

I was really inspired by some of the chapters. I enjoyed reading critique on mindfulness, self-monitoring, and firm-based wellness programs. I would criticize the authors' experience and knowledge on fat acceptance, or rather the lack of knowledge on body positivity. The movement, I feel, has long since moved on from fat acceptance to body positivity, and it is therefore unwise to write about the former without including the latter. This, in turn, made me question the authors' knowledge on barebacking culture, though I can't claim to have enough knowledge on that myself to judge their knowledge level.

But these last two things were only used as examples of resistance of the wellness syndrome in the last chapter before the conclusion. The main chapters themselves were wonderful. The ones criticizing the hype around wellness, search for happiness in all cost, or using all your life searching for ways to be more productive. And explaining how this all tied in with neoliberal capitalism and its values and valuelessness. How politics can be made empty so that everything is personal and nothing is political, so that your only way of making any changes is to make changes to your own body.

And still we have to fight for bodily autonomy, especially for women, trans people, disabled people and sex workers. *While* we fight capitalism and liberalism. While we fight to keep things political, to keep the political decisions and their consequences reported, to keep people informed, and to keep them/us motivated enough to keep on fighting. To keep them/us believing in the power we have to change things.

Well, this has long since ceased to be a book review. I think someone can read this book from a less political point of view, too. I can't.

Claus says

Absolutely fantastic critical sociological analysis of positive psychology and related ideologies of contemporary society. The book is filled with excellent examples that serve to illustrate the main argument of the book, i.e. that we are forced to be happy and positive even in the face of adverse living conditions thereby individualising problems that are in fact created at the societal level. The book is witty and funny as well. While the book provides an excellent analysis of contemporary society - its conclusion and 'solutions' to this syndrome is underdeveloped and to some extent apologetic of the idea of the human condition. I much prefer Evans and Reids (Resilient Life) more utopian take on that.

Mary Karpel-Jergic says

An interesting critique on the tyranny of positive thinking which seems to have pervaded every aspect of our lives. Labelling the state that we wish to reach as 'wellness' the book suggests that wellness has become a moral demand. A person who feels good and happy is a good person whereas a person who feels bad is a bad

person. This aspect of the discussion is informed by Alenka Zupancic's term biomorality. "Negativity, lack, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, are perceived more and more as moral faults"

The book is not concerned with wellness per se (although at times it seems that it is) but with how wellness has become "an ideology which is part of a larger transformation in contemporary culture where individual responsibility and self expression are morphed with the mind-set of a free market economy."

I liked this book because it considers a range of contexts which to support their argument (although in places a little disjointed) which in turn led me to some interesting insights especially towards the end when discussing illness.

However, I do think it was a tad too black and white and was too dismissive of the possible benefits of a mind set which engages fully with individual choice and responsibility. No, that doesn't mean that I think there aren't huge structural inequalities that impede people's quality of life, it just means that we do have some choice in some matters.

Jacques Michel says

Essentially, I read it like this:

The book builds on the concept theorized by philosopher Michel Foucault who said that power is not only repressive but also productive.

People thinking that they are living a free life in which they want to always reach new goals and improve themselves actually do what is necessary under neoliberalism and reinforce government and capitalistic power.

So I was expecting the book to address this theorization but it rather states the concept of maximizing neoliberal agents at the beginning and then applies it to different spheres of life: work, fitness, eating, personal development. And it ends up being a bit repetitive and doesn't provide any solution other than 'be altruistic'...

Good ideas to keep in mind nonetheless.

Toto says

A vacuous book that mocks and belittles those who try to live better and healthier than their parents and their grandparents. If you ask the authors, the current obsession with wellness is the corrupt idea produced and shoved down our throats by the corporate capitalists. Wellness has become, in other words, an ideology working to benefit those with money and power. I suppose what they would wish us to do is eat all the crappy food of our ancestors, sit around and do drugs and drink excessively, as a result of which we reject capitalist agenda of wellness and the money bags that profit from it. See how ridiculous it is when one exaggerates? In their criticism of the silly season we're in now--eat this, don't eat that, exercise this much, but not that much, etc.--they commit the same form of excess that they make fun of in those who follow fad diets, practice extreme fitness and do other nonsense. Most of their criticism amounts to straw men arguments, however, as most people with common sense know how to separate b.s. from truly important steps toward wellness with or without the help of capitalists.

